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Husband Dominant, Wife Dominant, Joint:  
A Shopping Typology for the 1990s?  

Marilyn Lavin, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Wisconsin

This study examines whether marketers' traditional classification of consumer goods as wife dominant, husband dominant, and joint continues to be relevant to understanding the purchase participation of contemporary married persons. Using data obtained from a sample of husbands and wives deemed likely to have redefined their purchase responsibilities, the current results suggest that gender-based socialization of men and women with regard to shopping participation is highly resistant to change. In general, the categorization of spousal purchase participation that marketers first suggested in the 1950s appears to be a valid descriptor in the 1990s.

INTRODUCTION

At least since the Industrial Revolution, the norm has been for husbands to work outside the home and for wives to focus their efforts on children and domestic duties. Concomitant with this traditional division of authority, males, relative to females, have had greater access to personal and social resources such as education, income, and occupational prestige. The division of labor that provided the opportunity for men to develop and have recognized highly specific marketplace skills, however, also enabled women to acquire their own specialized abilities that facilitated the accomplishment of childcare and domestic duties.

The division of marital responsibilities into marketplace and domestic spheres seems also to have affected the allocation of consumer purchase jurisdiction for the household. Husbands have controlled the purchase of products about which broad marketplace knowledge was required; wives have overseen the choice of items necessary for the day-to-day operation of the home; and both partners have contributed their particular skills to the acquisition of goods that touch on areas of mutual interest and authority. This circumstance has permitted marketers to classify a wide range of consumer goods on the basis of the spouse or spouses expected to participate in the product purchase decision. Managers, in turn, have developed from this useful trichotomy of "husband dominant," "wife dominant," and "joint" goods a variety of product, promotion, price and distribution strategies designed to meet optimally the needs and wants of the anticipated purchaser.

The product-centered schema of spousal purchase participation has served marketers well. Since World War II, however, increasingly large numbers of wives have accepted work responsibilities outside the home. In addition, since the 1960s, the Women's Movement has encouraged the empowerment of females and has challenged the traditional gender-based division of marital responsibilities. Those circumstances may well have changed the participation of both husbands and wives in purchase activities, especially if wives' involvement in work outside the home has negatively affected their liking for shopping as well as decreased the discretionary time available to them.

The present study considers whether or not the wife dominant, husband dominant, joint classification of spousal purchase participation continues to be relevant to understanding the purchase participation of contemporary married persons. It first reviews the literature that has examined husband-wife buying jurisdiction and develops several hypotheses suggested by that research. It then outlines the data and methods used to test those hypotheses and discusses the resulting findings and their implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early academic research on the division of purchases between husbands and wives sought to identify the spouse primarily responsible for major consumer decisions. Relying on a survey of wives conducted in the Detroit area during the 1950s, Sharp and Mott (1956) found that husbands dominated car purchases, wives controlled food budgeting, both partners participated in housing and vacation choices, and either the husband alone or both spouses together made life insur-
ance decisions. On the basis of a national survey of both husbands and wives, Wolgast (1958) contemporaneously reported a similar gender-based distribution of household purchase decision making. Her research showed that the male partner had most influence on car choice, the female prevailed in the selection of home appliances and household goods, and both spouses shared responsibility for "seeing to it that some money gets saved."

When researchers in the late 1960s and early 1970s examined spousal influence on various dimensions of purchase choice, a distinctive pattern revealing the dominant influence of one or both partners again emerged. Davis (1970) discovered that, in regard to car purchases, husbands were more likely to control decisions related to when and where to buy as well as those concerning cost and make. Both spouses, however, participated in the choice of model and color. In regard to furniture, both were involved in decisions related to cost, timing, and place of purchase, but the wife dominated the selection of which pieces to obtain, and she also had the greater voice on style, color and fabric. In a subsequent study, Davis and Rigaux (1974) attempted to extend those findings to a broader range of 25 commonly purchased products. They found that some shifts of relative spousal influence occurred during the problem recognition, information search, and final decision stages of consumer choice. Nonetheless, control of most products remained constant through all three stages. For example, husbands dominated the purchase of all forms of insurance; wives dominated the selection of kitchenware, household cleaning products, wife's and children's clothing, and food; and both partners shared responsibility for the choice of housing, living room furniture, children's toys and school, concerts, movies, theater and family vacations.

Since 1975 a number of studies have examined whether the acceptance of modern sex role ideology has affected husbands' and wives' participation in buying tasks. Green and Cunningham (1975) found that spouses with modern role attitudes made a greater number of joint consumer decisions, and that wives with more contemporary beliefs were more likely to take part in product selections traditionally considered under male jurisdiction. The work of Schaninger, Buss, and Grover (1982) revealed a positive association between non-traditional role orientation and husband or wife influence on purchases customarily identified with the spouse of the opposite sex. Qualis (1982) also reported that role beliefs influence husband and wife purchase involvement. Qualis (1984) found that role orientation affects the means couples use to resolve preference differences, and Qualis (1987) reported evidence supporting a "theoretical network of household decision making" that links sex role orientation to spousal influence, preference agreement, mode of conflict resolution, and consumer decision outcomes.

**HYPOTHESES**

Research has linked acceptance of egalitarian role beliefs to greater involvement of husbands and wives with purchases traditionally performed by spouses of the opposite sex. It has not, however, reported how widespread are such "modern" role attitudes and the departures from customary husband-wife jurisdiction associated with them. The consistent pattern of results obtained in the various studies done in the 1970s and 1980s, however, suggests the conclusion that changes in spousal buying participation may not be trivial.

Wives' increasing participation in the workplace and the advancement by the Women's Movement of an egalitarian sex role ideology are factors likely to be underlying alterations in husband-wife buying roles. The timing of those phenomena suggest that changes in spousal purchase participation would be most frequently found among husbands and working wives who came of age during the 1960s or later. Those possibilities lead to the following hypothesis:

**H1**: Husbands and working wives who came of age during the 1960s or later do not define their own responsibilities for household purchases in terms of the customary classification of products as husband dominant, wife dominant, and joint.

Changes in shopping patterns may be occurring even if husbands and wives continue to define their purchase responsibilities according to the traditional schema. For example, husbands and wives with primary responsibility for a product purchase may be willing, in practice, to allow their spouses to exercise that control. As a less extreme option, husbands and wives may be willing to share shopping responsibilities customarily...
considered the province of one or the other spouse. Those possibilities are considered in Hypotheses 2 and 3.

**H2:** Husbands and wives who came of age during the 1960s or later are willing to allow their spouses sole purchase responsibility for products that have been traditionally classified as within the sole purchase jurisdiction of their own sexes.

**H3:** Husbands and wives who came of age during the 1960s or later are willing to join with their spouses to purchase products that have been traditionally classified as within the purchase jurisdiction of one partner.

**METHOD**

A mail questionnaire was sent to 1,074 persons selected from the charge account list of a leading national mail order catalog targeted at working women. The sample subjects were chosen on a number of criteria. Each listed a spouse on his or her credit application and was between the ages of 25 and 44. In addition, each resided in a census block whose average income was $40,000 or more, a fact that minimizes possible confounds related to socioeconomic status.

Each of the sample members received, by first class mail, a personalized letter outlining the purpose of the study. To permit the collection of data on the spouses of married sample members, two copies of the survey instrument and two postage-paid envelopes were sent. Where appropriate, each sample member and spouse was asked to answer a questionnaire independently and to return it in one of the envelopes provided. The participation of both husband and wife was urged. If only one spouse was willing to cooperate, however, that individual was encouraged to return his or her completed instrument, since the study was not based on matching respective wife and husband responses. One week after the initial mailing, a reminder postcard was sent to each member of the sample; this card indicated a phone number that could be called collect to obtain additional information about the survey.

To assess the distribution of household buying between husbands and wives, married respondents rated, on a five-point scale, a series of shopping and purchase options involving six products. They indicated willingness to shop and purchase by themselves, willingness to allow their spouses sole control of the search and purchase, and willingness to perform these tasks with their spouses. The long-standing classification of consumer products as husband dominant, wife dominant, and joint guided the selection of the sex products. Two of the goods -- auto insurance and motor oil and filter -- belong to categories that have been traditionally categorized as husband dominant (Sharp and Mott 1956; Wolgast 1958; Davis and Rigaux 1974; Green and Cunningham 1975), two others -- living room sofa and child's game -- have been related to joint control (Davis and Rigaux 1974; Green and Cunningham 1975), and two -- food processor and gourmet coffee -- have been associated with wife jurisdiction (Davis and Rigaux 1974). The financial risk associated with higher cost was also incorporated as a factor potentially influencing husband-wife purchase participation. One product in each category could be obtained for $20 or less (motor oil and filter, gourmet coffee, and child's game), while the other would require a considerably higher monetary expenditure (auto insurance, food processor, and living room sofa).

Finally, each respondent provided demographic information. Those data included age, level of education, annual pre-tax income, hours worked per week and occupational title. The data were collected for both the individual answering the questionnaire and that person's spouse.

**RESULTS**

From the 1,074 persons contacted, 304 completed questionnaires were returned. Of those, 185 came from individuals who were married and under 50 years of age at the time of the survey. These respondents appeared to represent the sector of husbands and wives most likely to engage in non-traditional purchase. The average age of the 68 husbands was 35, with 77 percent under 40 years of age; the average age of the 117 wives was 34, with 89 percent under 40. Coming from 34 states and the District of Columbia, these married persons were highly educated: 75 percent of the respondents either attended college, earned a college degree, or attained a postgraduate degree, and 69 percent of their spouses completed similar amounts of schooling. All of the husbands were employed and their median earnings were between $30,000 and $40,000; 96 percent of the...
wives were employed and their median earnings were between $20,000 and $30,000.

If reallocations of shopping obligations between husbands and wives are occurring, the respective partners should be willing to assume responsibility for the purchase of items that have traditionally been bought by the spouse of the opposite sex or by both spouses together. Tables 1 and 2 show, respectively, the average "willingness to shop and buy alone" scores that husbands and wives in the present survey attained for the two female dominant goods, the two male dominant goods, and the two joint goods. Those scores are the result of assigning "willingness to shop" responses numerical values ranging from 1 to 5 so that lowest scores are related to responses of the most extreme unwillingness.

Given the scoring procedure, the mean scores for "willingness to shop alone" in Table 1 indicate that most male respondents did not report that they were "willing" or "extremely willing" to accept sole responsibility for the two female dominant goods - gourmet coffee and food processor. Neither did they feel positive about shopping by themselves for the two joint goods -- the child's game and the living room sofa. By contrast, the husbands' averages for the two male dominant goods -- auto insurance and the motor oil and filter -- show considerable enthusiasm for acting alone in shopping for and buying those products.

Their mean scores for "willingness to shop and buy alone" indicate that most of the wives in the survey were "willing" or "extremely willing" to accept sole buying responsibility for the two female dominant products -- the food processor and the gourmet coffee -- and for the less expensive joint product -- the child's game. They were less enthusiastic about acting alone in the purchase of the two male dominant products -- the auto insurance and the motor oil and filter. Likewise, they were not eager to assume sole responsibility for the purchase of the living room sofa.

Paired one-tailed t-tests reveal that wives, like husbands, assign to themselves the buying tasks customarily associated with their sex. The statistically significant differences in the data (p ≤ .05) suggest that wives generally are more willing to take sole responsibility for the purchase of items classified as female dominant than to assume it for comparably priced products in the other categories. Wives are more willing to act alone in buying a food processor than in purchasing auto insurance or a living room sofa. Likewise, they prefer to buy by themselves gourmet coffee rather than motor oil and a filter. A single departure from the overall pattern indicates that wives are more willing to act alone in purchasing a child's toy -- the less expensive product traditionally defined as joint -- than in buying coffee.

Husbands and wives continue to consider the purchase of a living room sofa a responsibility to be carried out jointly by both spouses. Comparisons of the "shop alone," "spouse shop alone," and "shop with spouse" scores shown in Table 1 indicate that most of those husbands are unwilling to assume sole responsibility for the sofa, are somewhat more willing to surrender control to their wives, and are most enthusiastic about buying this item with their spouses. For their part, the wives' mean scores shown in Table 2 suggest that they are unwilling to pass this responsibility to their mates, that they are somewhat willing to buy this product alone, but that they are most willing to obtain the sofa with their husbands.

The evidence related to the two husband dominant goods, two wife dominant goods, and the more expensive joint good considered in the present survey suggests that the traditional marketing classification of products according to
expected spousal purchaser continues to be valid. The findings do not support Hypothesis 1, which suggests that husbands and wives who matured since the Women's Movement of the 1960s do not divide household buying according to the customary classification of products as husband dominant, wife dominant, and joint. Moreover, the current results associated with willingness to be involved with the child's game do not necessarily indicate a shift in spousal buying. The mean scores shown in Tables 1 and 2 show that husbands are willing to allow their spouses sole control of the purchase of this product and that wives are willing to accept such responsibility. Those consistent outcomes suggest that cheaper toys may be misclassified as "joint products." Instead, both spouses appear to view the purchase of such items as maternal responsibilities, a possibility that reinforces the sex-stereotyped role of the wife as household purchasing agent.

The implicit categorization of shopping activities as within the jurisdiction of one or both spouses may be a result of deeply-ingrained socialization processes. If that is true, the prevalence of wives working outside the home and of a more egalitarian sex role ideology may make their impacts on spousal shopping participation gradually rather than suddenly. Some evidence of that slow realignment of shopping jurisdiction may exist, if, as suggested by Hypotheses 2 and 3, husbands and wives are willing to transfer sole purchase responsibilities to their spouses, or if they are willing to participate jointly in buying goods traditionally considered under the control of one spouse.

Table 1 shows husbands' mean "willingness to shop alone" and "willingness to allow spouse to shop alone" scores for the two male dominant goods -- the motor oil and filter combination and the auto insurance. Statistically significant differences (p≤.05) for paired one-tailed t-tests reveal that husbands prefer to retain control of these tasks rather than to allow wives to act alone in buying those products. Wives also appear reluctant to transfer shopping authority to their husbands. Table 2 shows their mean "willingness to shop alone" and "willingness to allow spouse to shop alone" scores for the two female dominant products -- the gourmet coffee and the food processor. The respective averages indicate that the majority of female respondents indicated that they are "willing" or "extremely willing" to perform these tasks alone, while they are less eager to permit their spouses control of the purchases. In addition, statistically significant differences (p≤.05) revealed in paired one-tailed t-tests suggest that wives prefer to retain control over the purchase of those products. The evidence for both husbands and wives does not support Hypothesis 2.

Data shown in Tables 1 and 2 do indicate some willingness on the part of both husbands and wives to shop together for products traditionally seen as within the purview of the spouse of their own sex and for those customarily put under the jurisdiction of the spouse of the opposite sex. The mean "willingness to shop with spouse" scores displayed in Table 1 show that most husbands have considerable enthusiasm about joining their wives in the selection of the food processor and the auto insurance, the two more expensive items in the female and male dominant categories. Their average "shop with spouse" scores are somewhat lower, however, for the two less costly items, the coffee and the motor oil-filter combination. In contrast with the processor and insurance, the coffee and the motor oil-filter combination have relatively low financial risk and are more frequently purchased. Those circumstances suggest that husbands, who also reveal greater enthusiasm for buying the motor oil and filter alone than with their wives, may be guided by expedience rather than ideology in their willingness to allocate control of cheaper goods to the spouse with greater expertise in a product category.

Wives also appear willing to shop with their husbands. The mean "willingness to shop with spouse" scores shown in Table 2 are high for both male dominant and both female dominant products. Cost and frequency of purchase, however, appear to affect wives' as well as husbands' joint shopping preferences. With regard to the food processor, the wives are indifferent to shopping alone or with their spouses, while for the auto insurance they favor joint purchase. By contrast, their highest score related to the motor oil filter purchase reflects the desire to have their spouses take responsibility for that task, while with regard to the coffee they prefer to shop alone.

The results pertaining to joint purchase do offer some support for Hypothesis 3, which posits that husbands and wives who came of age during the 1960s or later are willing to participate with their
spouses in purchases traditionally considered husband or wife dominant. These present findings, however, also suggest that the respective spouses may also consider expense and frequency of purchase when determining whether to join in a purchase decision. Thus, they appear willing to devote the time and effort associated with joint shopping to more costly items that are infrequently obtained, but they seem to prefer to allow the traditional spouse-buyer, who may have greater expertise in a product category, to take sole responsibility for less expensive, frequently purchased goods.

CONCLUSION

The results of the present study suggest that gender-based socialization of men and women with regard to shopping participation is highly resistant to change. Given their ages, the husbands and wives in the current sample are likely to have been exposed to the egalitarian sex role ideology associated with the modern Women's Movement. Respondents of both sexes are well-educated and enjoy reasonably high earnings, while the vast majority of the wives are employed outside the home. Nonetheless, these married men and women continue to define their own shopping responsibilities according to a classification that first emerged in the 1950s, and they are reluctant to transfer to their partners those buying tasks over which they have had traditional control.

The current findings also indicate that movement away from the customary division of husband-wife buying jurisdiction is likely to be gradual. Husbands and wives in this survey did show considerable willingness to join their spouses in some consumer decisions that have been traditionally categorized as husband or wife dominant. These results may be seen as an extension of earlier research that has linked acceptance of modern sex role norms with the greater participation of both spouses in joint purchase tasks (Green and Cunningham 1975; Schaninger, Buss, and Grover 1982; and Qualls 1982). In addition, these results suggest the possibility that buying with a spouse, who has traditionally undertaken a purchase and who may have expertise in that product category, may facilitate future departures from the customary distribution of household shopping.

In sum, the classification of household purchases as husband dominant, wife dominant and joint continues to describe the distribution of buying authority between contemporary husbands and wives. There is, however, some evidence that at least younger, educated married persons with relatively substantial earnings may be willing to participate in a greater number of consumer decisions with their spouses. As a consequence, continued monitoring of husband and wife shopping for particular kinds of products and in specific retail environments appears necessary to detect more dramatic realignments of spousal buying activities that may occur in the future.

LIMITATIONS

The current study focused on subjects who were well-educated, affluent, and young enough to have matured during or after the revolution in sex roles associated with the modern Women's Movement. Moreover, almost all the wives worked outside the home. According to the theoretical assumptions that have driven research in recent decades, these husbands and wives should have constituted the group most likely to depart from traditional definitions of spousal purchase responsibilities. The study, however, did not explicitly compare the full range of socioeconomic and cultural groups. Research of that scope would naturally be of interest, but pursuing it in the absence of a well-developed theoretical rationale seems premature.

The present data set includes responses collected, in part, from husband-wife pairs and, in part, from individual husbands and wives. The lack of independence in the responses provided by the couples violates the assumptions necessary for making direct comparisons of mean husband and wife scores. Paired t-tests on the subset of data provided by the 64 husband-wife pairs among the respondents, however, revealed results consistent with those reported here (Lavin 1988).

REFERENCES


TABLE 1
Husbands’ Mean Scores Reflecting Willingness to Shop and Buy Alone, to Allow Spouse to Shop and Buy Alone, and to Shop and Buy with Spouse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Willingness To Shop and Buy Alone</th>
<th>Willingness To Allow Spouse To Shop and Buy Alone</th>
<th>Willingness To Shop and Buy with Spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food Processor</td>
<td>3.30 (n=66)</td>
<td>4.08 (n=66)</td>
<td>4.08 (n=65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gourmet Coffee</td>
<td>3.62 (n=65)</td>
<td>3.97 (n=66)</td>
<td>3.89 (n=65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto Insurance</td>
<td>4.06 (n=66)</td>
<td>3.16 (n=64)</td>
<td>4.20 (n=65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor Oil and Filter</td>
<td>4.60 (n=68)</td>
<td>3.32 (n=63)</td>
<td>3.98 (n=64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Room Sofa</td>
<td>2.83 (n=65)</td>
<td>3.52 (n=64)</td>
<td>4.36 (n=67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s Game</td>
<td>3.83 (n=66)</td>
<td>4.35 (n=65)</td>
<td>4.05 (n=66)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The scores were obtained by assigning numerical values ranging from 1 to 5 to the subjects’ "willingness to shop" responses. The lowest score reflects the most extreme unwillingness.

Statistically significant differences (p≤.05) were found between scores indicating willingness to shop alone for the following pairs of products: gourmet coffee and motor oil and filter, food processor and auto insurance, motor oil and filter and child’s game, auto insurance and living room sofa.

Statistically significant differences (p≤.05) were found between scores indicating willingness to shop alone and allow spouse to shop alone for food processor, auto insurance, living room sofa, child’s game, and motor oil and filter.
**TABLE 2**

Wives' Mean Scores Reflecting Willingness to Shop and Buy Alone, to Allow Spouse to Shop and Buy Alone, and to Shop and Buy with Spouse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Willingness To Shop and Buy Alone</th>
<th>Willingness To Allow Spouse To Shop and Buy Alone</th>
<th>Willingness To Shop and Buy with Spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food Processor</td>
<td>4.26 (n=114)</td>
<td>3.24 (n=110)</td>
<td>4.31 (n=112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gourmet Coffee</td>
<td>4.27 (n=114)</td>
<td>3.60 (n=108)</td>
<td>4.03 (n=110)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto Insurance</td>
<td>3.43 (n=110)</td>
<td>3.77 (n=111)</td>
<td>4.47 (n=114)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor Oil and Filter</td>
<td>3.44 (n=112)</td>
<td>4.64 (n=114)</td>
<td>4.23 (n=110)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Room Sofa</td>
<td>3.86 (n=111)</td>
<td>2.25 (n=110)</td>
<td>4.58 (n=115)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's Game</td>
<td>4.49 (n=112)</td>
<td>3.78 (n=108)</td>
<td>4.29 (n=110)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The scores were obtained by assigning numerical values ranging from 1 to 5 to the subjects' "willingness to shop" responses. The lowest score reflects the most extreme unwillingness.*

Statistically significant differences (p<.05) were found between scores indicating willingness to shop alone for the following pairs of products: food processor and auto insurance, food processor and living room sofa, gourmet coffee and motor oil and filter.

Statistically significant differences (p<.05) were found between scores indicating willingness to shop alone and allow spouse to shop alone for the food processor, gourmet coffee, motor oil and filter, living room sofa, and child's game.